DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 458 052 RC 022 714

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TITLE Education in Micronesia: A Multicultural Perspective.
PUB DATE 1991-00-00
NOTE 11p.
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cognitive Style; *Cultural Maintenance; *Culturally Relevant Education; *Educational Needs; Experiential Learning; Foreign Countries; Geographic Isolation; Indigenous Populations; Language of Instruction; Literacy; Native Language Instruction; *Nonformal Education; *Pacific Islanders; Rural Education; World Views
IDENTIFIERS *Micronesia

ABSTRACT

Traditional education in Micronesia has been informal and experiential, with a communal orientation. Certain knowledge is secret, and much folklore and mythology is sacred. For over 100 years, Western-style education has been imposed on Micronesia by the Spanish, Germans, Japanese, and Americans. Western education has focused on instruction in the language of the administering authority; literacy in that language; and vocational skills following a modern pattern, with emphasis on the development of individuality. There has been no effort to build on the preexisting foundations of traditional education. As Micronesians increasingly accept a money economy and consumer society, traditional education has lost status and prestige. The result has been impoverishment of the native languages--many children lack literacy in either their own language or English. Now that self-government is upon them, this generation of Micronesians must decide on the best form of education for their country. Based on research findings that it is easier to learn how to read in one's own language and that adults learn more quickly than children, it is proposed that children grow up in their villages with traditional education and then, at 16, enter Western-type schools to learn the present elementary secondary curriculum. This would assure the production of truly multicultural individuals. (TD)

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ED 458 052

EDUCATION IN MICRONESIA: A MULTICULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

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The area of the world known as Micronesia contains over 1,000 islands, a variety of languages and cultures. It has been governed by the Spanish, Germans, Japanese, and Americans. This has caused a unique educational system that has been hard kept to support and maintain local culture. In fact, just the opposite has seen to be true. In this article the author, based on two years of socio-anthropological observations describes the history of this educational development as well as offers some possible solutions to this unusual multicultural problem.

As a way of explaining the geographical and social situation in Micronesia, the following is a quotation from a statement made by David Ramarui when he was the Director of Education for what was then known as the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands (Now known as the Federated States of Micronesia):

> ...try to imagine what it would be like of we were to flood the entire continental United States with water and have only a couple of thousand mountain peaks and hilltops above the level of the water. We would have wiped out all the railroads, and all the radio and TV networks.
>
> Now let us in our imagination pick out about 100 of the larger hilltops and settle them with people, clustering about in 7,000 in the Los Angles area speaking French; 2,500 in the Reno area speaking German; 12,000 in the Fargo area speaking Spanish; 9,000 in the Kansas City area speaking Japanese; 10,000 in the Indianapolis area speaking Greek; and 10,000 in the Washington, D.C area speaking Russian. On the hilltops in between scatter another 65,000

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people speaking Dutch, Chinese and Turkish.

> Now, by way of giving these people a common Language, try to teach them all English as a second language. By way of helping these people travel from place to place on six of the hilltops scratch out short dirt runways and put in a two-airplane airline. Then toss in about a dozen small tramp steamers to go between the smaller islands. And for the communication system between those six major population centers install a one-channel radio telephone system, and put in each a low-powered public radio station. Finally, move this whole area to the far western Pacific just above the equator with its capital about as far away from Washington, D. C. as Bombay, India is. (Baker, 1978)

Having spent two years in Micronesia as a Teacher Corps Director I can easily say that other than the name, little else has changed since David Ramarui issued that fascinating description.

TRADITIONAL MICRONESIAN EDUCATION

Education in Micronesia is as old as the first settlement of the islands. All of the traditional cultures of the area have methods by which the knowledge of people and their environment is passed from the elders of one generation to the youth of the next generation. This traditional education must be viewed as effective in so far as it did transmit skills, techniques, and knowledge in the areas of handicrafts, agriculture, fishing, astronomy, navigation, medicine, house and boat construction and stonework. Also the peoples' history, genealogy, religion, mythology, and folklore were passed from one generation to the next. Due to the number and diversity of Micronesian cultures, generalizations and broad statements are made with the danger of error and exaggeration. We would like, however, to try and at least create a thumbnail sketch of some of the commonalties of traditional Micronesian education. First, one may say that the transmission of skills and knowledge was by oral and visual means. Memory is more highly developed in traditional education systems than in Western systems. The

development of memory and the use of mnemonic devices such as chants, stories, and navigational charts accurately transmitted knowledge transmitted from generation to generation. The powers of visual observation were also highly developed... only a diligent and patient observation of forms and their relationships to one another will lead one to knowledge of weather and tides, the habits of animals, or the subtle techniques of the woodworker.

Traditional education is predominately practical; one learns by doing. Farming techniques, construction methods, even medicine and navigation are learned by the activity itself rather than through theory. Much of the knowledge of traditional education is secret; that is to say, it is the property of only a few people in the community and is not openly shared. Although many skills are shared and may be called common knowledge (especially in areas like fishing and farming), other skills and knowledge are the exclusive possession of a few individuals or caste. In Truk district, *itang* knowledge encompassing diverse areas in folklore and history, weather prediction, the habits of animals, and divination is the exclusive knowledge of a secret "guild." In Ponape the possessors of cures and healing medicines are a group of specialists called *sow-n-wini* or *kati-n-wini*. Such secrets relating to specialized knowledge may be inherited or even at times purchased, but they are certainly not freely shared with everyone.

For almost a hundred years, traditional education in Micronesia has coexisted with various forms of Western education. In Ponape and the Marshall's, mission schools have been in operation since the 1870's, and by the 1920's all districts had already had limited access to Western style education. The early schools were taught in the local languages. The first Ponapean readers were produced in the last century by the Boston Missionary Society. State education under the German, Japanese, and American administrations have been mainly in the language of the administering country.

INTRODUCTION OF WESTERN EDUCATIONAL MODELS

If we were to characterize this Western style education, we could say that it is institutional, with the main emphasis being upon instruction in the language of the administering authority, literacy in that language and vocational skills following a modern pattern. When we say the schools are institutional, we mean that Western education takes place in an environment different from the everyday environment of the people. Specialists trained in Western pedagogy control instruction in content and method.

There actually has been no educational development as such in Micronesia. Traditional education has continued to varying degrees beside the different Western systems of education, which were adapted to Micronesia. Western education in Micronesia is thus a history of such attempts at adaptation and almost never an effort to build on the pre-existing foundations of traditional education. Indeed the differing nature and goals of traditional and Western education would make of melding of the two extremely difficult. If we try to introduce the instruction of a traditional skill into a school, we are soon confronted with many potential problems. Perhaps the skill is secret and the specialist cannot be induced to impart his or her knowledge to a broad audience. Perhaps the children are not of a proper age to be instructed. Perhaps there are taboo or caste questions with regard to the specific skill. Perhaps the Western school has mixed students speaking different languages, which makes instruction impossible in the vernacular language of the potential instructor. Certification procedures of a Western school system make it very difficult to integrate traditional instructors into the schools on a permanent basis. There is also a very real possibility that the school is an improper setting for the transmission of certain knowledge. For instance, much of the folklore and mythology of Micronesia is essentially sacred. It is part of the religious worldview of the nation involved. Schools are secular in form and tone. To expect a fifth grade teacher to properly present an indigenous creation story to his/her students is to risk reducing the sacred down to the level of a Dick and Jane English as a second language dialogue. It is the wrong story at the wrong place at the wrong time.

LEARNING BY DOING TO FOSTER MULTICULTURALISM

Despite such problems and dangers, there is much talk today in Micronesia by all sectors of society on the necessity of authentic educational development. Self-government is already upon them, and decisions and policies must be made by this generation of Micronesians as to the best form, method, and content of education for an emerging country. One thing is clear; much of the knowledge of traditional education is too important and vital to be ignored. It represents the heritage of scores of generations and is well suited for the islands' environment, temperament, and cultures. The literacy and skills, however, offered by Western style education is of perhaps equal importance in dealing with present day island conditions.

What people seem to be aiming at is a multicultural education: an education that would allow people to successfully cope with a variety of environments: an education that would not delimit but expand capabilities. Presently we are confronted with many unpleasant phenomena in Micronesia. There has developed an unfortunate generation gap between products of traditional education and those who have received Western education. Children, especially in district centers, are growing up with little knowledge of traditional island skills and customs. Sometimes they do not speak any language well: their native language and their English are both rudimentary, and they lack literacy in any tongue. They often are ignorant of Micronesian customs and manners as well as Western customs. They are representatives of a phenomenon to be seen in many third wold countries that have adapted Western educational institutions. They are, in effect, people lost between the two worlds. Actually the more successful a student is in Western education the greater the anger that s/he will become alienated from his/her own community. This is particularly true in so far as Western education tends to regard the development of individuality in thought an action. This of course is the opposite of the more communal orientation of traditional Micronesia.

How can multicultural education best be approached? What is required to see the question? Is it a matter of what is to be the language of instruction? Is it a question

of the form of the schools themselves? Or is it a question of content and style? One suspects that the question is complex: that it contains many factors and inter-relationships. One suspects that it is perhaps not best approached by a priori definitions, but rather by a thoughtful consideration of all the questions posed above.

THE IMPACT OF LANGUAGE

Language is more than a mere means of communication. It is also a culture, an ethos, an identity, and a worldview. To separate people from their language is to separate them from the lore of their ancestors, the wisdom of their elders, and from their place in the world. It is hard to say what it means to be a Trukese or Yapese, but it certainly includes a good knowledge of the Trukese and Yapese languages. What we see happening today is an impoverishment of the native Micronesian languages. More and more people, both young and old, begin to define education as being exclusively Western style education. Traditional education loses status and prestige almost in direct proportion to the acceptance of a money economy and a consumer society. Leisure that was a prerequisite of traditional education is no longer with people in many district centers and villages. Many children and adults are on the 40-hour workweek. All of this leads to a weakening of the local languages. They have no status or usage in the new educational or work situations. They are not growing to meet the demands of a new environment. Increasingly more words are introduced from Japanese and English to cope with new objects. Children do not learn the names of the things in their own environment because they are in the artificial environment of the schoolroom. Some of these tendencies are no doubt irreversible. This should be accepted face on by the community. You cannot expect to enter into a money economy and preserve intact a culture based upon a great deal of free time. There is, however, much that could be done in the realm of language development.

To my knowledge, none of the professional studies done on how people learn how to read has ever claimed that it was better to learn to read in a foreign language. Yet this is precisely the history of literacy in Micronesia. If we ask school children in Los

Angeles to learn to read in Japanese, we would expect to be confronted with many and continuing problems in literacy. What we are discussing here is not the desirability of teaching English in Micronesian schools, but rather a matter of readiness skills. Is it in fact easier to learn how to read in one's native language and later transfer the skill to another language? All of our experience in education would lead us to say "yes". Maybe we are all saying "yes" at this point to the development in vernacular language arts. How much development? Maybe to the very limits of our ability to produce material in the various languages. Certainly math and social studies can be as effectively taught in Ponapean as English can if we make the necessary efforts. This includes a conscious effort at expanding the vocabularies of the vernacular languages by coining new images and words. We must admit our limitations in finding people able and willing to engage in such work, but a change in priorities could accomplish much. By an increased use of the vernacular languages in the schools we could also bring about a restoration of their status and prestige.

PRESENT REALITY IN MICRONESIAN SCHOOLS

The form of Micronesian schools is entirely Western. Children begin school when they are seven years old, sit in mixed classes of boys and girls in front of teachers who are assumed to have a monopoly on knowledge. In Micronesia there is a severe shortage of good, capable teachers, yet there is a system that besides being very expensive (being developed for the pockets of an extremely affluent society) requires large numbers of good teachers. There is admittedly a shortage of relevant curriculum materials, and there are almost none in the vernacular languages. Yet we insist on a full school day and school year on the American pattern for all children over seven years of age. Recent studies indicate that children up to about ten years of age are deficient in certain motor abilities in their nervous system which allow for reading and abstract thought (Piaget, 69: Flavell, 77: Orbell, 81). This is not to say that they can't do it, but simply that it takes much longer for a seven-year-old to learn to read than an eleven-year-old. In all areas but foreign languages adults learn immensely more quickly than children. The work of Paulo Freire has shown that large blocks of curriculum can be

learned in short time spans because of older students better motivation, vaster experience with life, and excellent motor skills. (Freire, 1970).

PROPOSAL FOR THE FUTURE

One could imagine an education completely in the "learning by doing" sense; that is to say, the children could grow up in the villages learning all the traditional skills and lore from the older people. At the age of sixteen they could all enter school for a period of six years during which time the entire present day elementary and high school curriculum could be duplicated with better results. This would be immensely cheaper in terms of money, physical plants, and trained personnel (requiring a third as many teachers). Such a system would be more realistic with regard to the availability of good teachers, and by allowing children the leisure to follow a natural island childhood in a natural environment it would assure the production of truly multicultural individuals.

Alternatives do exist to Western style education. Some are being tried today in countries like Tanzania, China, Peru and India (Grenville, 1982). In Micronesia one is not forced by economics to try these alternatives as are these other countries, but we should remember that there are other than economic factors in life. We should carefully ask whether in fact it makes any sense for seven-year-olds to attend school other than providing employment for their teachers and a baby-sitting service for their family. The more we abstract a child from the real world of his/her environment, the less leisure s/he has to learn from life and experience, the less s/he will absorb of traditional education. If political and economic factors dictate that ten-year-olds are to attend school, then how many hours a day is justified? What do we have to offer these students that will justify our denying them the leisure time and opportunity to learn fishing, for example?

SUMMARIZING THROUGH ISSUES OF CONTENT AND STYLE

We have previously touched upon the question of the content of the schools. To summarize: nothing should be taught in the schools that could be better or more appropriately taught in the community. This will of course vary in the community (beware the too overly strict and limiting curriculum). In a district center, maybe the only place a person will learn farming or folklore will be in a school. This is certainly not the case on an outer island or village. However, people on outer islands and villages are increasingly turning over more and more functions to the schools. There exists a naive faith in the powers of the Western school model. We must admit that much of this faith is misplaced. There are many things better taught at home or in the community: customs, folklore, morals, traditional skills, etc. It is impossible to say what the dividing line will be since it obviously varies from community to community. A child's or an adult's education should ideally take advantage of all of the resources available to that community in both its traditional and Western aspects.

A subtler problem inherent in Western education in Micronesia is the question of style. It ultimately might become the most important question. Once when I taught in an African American middle school in Washington, D. C., I used to upset my students by trying to dissect and analyze music in our finest Western tradition. They would say, "Why do you have to talk so much about the sounds, Can't you hear them? Can't you feel them?" They were right. If we can't hear the music there is no sense talking about it. Yet if we hear, there is nothing left to say. It's all redundant. Westerners have a historical and cultural predisposition toward analytical, deductive, introspective, and temporal modes of thought. This is not good or bad in itself. Western education has naturally followed along the lines of these same tendencies. However, other cultures especially those of the Orient and many traditional cultures have other predisposition's and tastes which involve different approaches and perhaps lead to different capabilities. One can be inductive instead of deductive, externally oriented instead of introspective, and oriented more to space than to time. One suspects that most Micronesians in fact are so predisposed. Certainly there is a much different concept of time in Micronesia.

The point is that these differing concepts of time, space, and logic are crucial to the approach one would take to different subject matter. Mathematics and history are not necessarily taught the same every place in the world. These different conceptual frameworks often exasperate Americans in the islands. To the extent that we have Micronesian teachers, many of these conceptual differences may never become problems in the classroom. But one cannot be so sure even of this. Certainly within Micronesia itself there is a vast difference in cultural styles and one wonders if the Yapese teacher has any easier time of it than the American does in Truk or Ponape does. But style is extremely important not only in teaching methodology but also in curriculum development and implementation. It is an area in which Micronesia can expect little outside help. For Micronesians, by Micronesians, by doing, would seem to be key.

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